

LIFE ON SANTA MIGUEL ISLAND IN THE YEAR OF 1903

By Arklee Gillian Rawlins

In Spring of 1990 during a visit to the Christy Ranch on Santa Cruz Island, ranch cook Richard Maxwell showed me a manuscript his maternal great-grandmother, Arklee Rawlins, had written in 1903 about San Miguel Island. Accompanying her story was a series of photographs which are among the earliest known for this island. This short manuscript offers a delightful yet frustratingly brief vignette of the Rawlins family and their turn of the century San Miguel Island experiences. Captain Waters, for whom Mr. Rawlins worked, had been involved with San Miguel Island for over twenty years by 1903. Unfortunately, it is not known how long the Rawlins family stayed on San Miguel Island. The manuscript and photographs are here presented in their entirety.

When I heard of this island, we had not been in beautiful Santa Barbara but about 10 months. Well one morning, where we had an apartment, I saw a lady and her husband sitting near their baggage, so I asked the lady where they were going. She said they were going out to one of the Channel Islands about 45 miles off the mainland, southwest, to live on a sheep ranch owned by Captain Waters of Santa Barbara to care for it. Her health wasn't very good; she thought it would be a benefit to her. I was so enthused, being of a venturesome mind, I said, "Well if you ever give it up, will you let me know so we might go?" I'd love it I thought. I'd be able to talk my husband into such a venture. I already visioned we four on an Island—I had a little boy [age]4 and a girl, 2—all by ourselves, except at certain seasons when a Chinaman came over to dry the abalones to send back to China.

Well, I told my husband when he came back from work. He laughed at me and dismissed the thought. I had given her my address anyhow.

Well, in about a month a man came to my door with a note from this lady telling me they were back in Santa Barbara. She was not so well and just dying from lonesomeness. And I should go see the Captain. I went to see my husband first. Found him working on a rock crusher fixing to make the roads better. There were no paved roads in Santa Barbara. At that time, my husband wasn't any too strong for such work. He was an apiarist [and] he had his bees up on El Toro Canyon. About 400 colonies. [It] had been a bad bee season the spring before, so no money. He hadn't been able to get work more suited to him. He looked very tired, but he laughed again and said, "Why you know Captain Waters wouldn't let us go. And these two children—what of them? They might get sick." Well. I almost gave up the idea. Then I looked at him. He, I knew, wouldn't last long at such work. I said, "If I go to see the Captain—may I do that much?" He said, "Go ahead if that will make you feel better."

So I headed for Captain Waters' apartment, upstairs, just south of the Arlington Hotel, which burned down in later years. It must have been 10 blocks from the ocean where we lived on State Street where the Depot now stands. [With] Frannie, our little girl, and Richard trudging behind, I went upstairs where the Captain lived, and with fear and trembling, knocked on the door.

A very large gentleman, over 200 pounds, came to the door. They had been playing cards, one of the sports the Captain adored as I found out later. I laid [sic] my cards on the table; that is, I showed the children first. Then I handed him the note the lady had sent me. The Captain looked amused and said, "No, lady, I wouldn't want the children. Why they'd lose everything I have over there." Then I told him I didn't let them do so at home, The other gentleman jumped up and said, "Now Captain, you are mistaken. They will keep these two—father and mother—from being lonesome." I told him my husband couldn't leave his work or he would have come. "Well," the Captain said, "Lady, send your husband here tonight. I'll see what he looks like, but you will have to be ready by the 4th of July to go." He was waiting for the engine being overhauled of the boat, the *Pierless*, manned by Captain Vasquez. This happened on the 2nd of July.

Well, my husband saw him that evening. He was accepted from then on. He [Captain Waters] called my husband Dick. We had an extra day of grace, as the engine work took 'til the 5th of July. We sold our home to a friend and began to pack. My husband said, "Now I've made up my mind not to get sea sick." We drank our coffee and started to the wharf. We had to go down a stairway to a skiff and then he rowed out to the boat, or *Pierless*, as it was named. My husband dropped in the boat, but the motion made him lay half way down.

Then we drew alongside the *Pierless*. My husband slid in and never raised his head, [even] when he was offered a sandwich [sic]. Captain Vasquez said, “He’ll eat a whole sheep when we get there.” We were all day aking the trip, [arriving at] almost sundown, and we wondered if we wold hit the right trail. Captain Vasquez showed us the way to the head. It must have been a mile and a 1/2, and with the two tired children! But we finally struck the road, not wide enough to pass a wagon if one had been on the road, but roads over there were expensive to make.

Just as we got to the house, a young man came out the kitchen door [and] said he’d had a toothache and hadn’t looked to see if a boat had come in the harbor. He was so lonesome he said [he was] about to die. He had to wait until the boat went to the West End where the Chinaman had his abalones ready to load on [the] boat. That was the last we saw of the young man. He was so glad to get away—and only there 10 days.

The house was a two story one, 4 bedrooms upstairs, one down.¹ The Captain used to have house parties in his wife’s time—take a Chinese cook over and I guess they really did have a good time.

My husband’s work was to milk the cows and keep the water holes clear of the sand, as we had sand storms which blew and filled them. You could walk overthem if you didn’t know where they were to keep them open. [In] spring the sheep would have perished for water. He had two big horses to haul with, and the Devil, a mischievous mule.² My little girl called him the Devil, so while we were there, we did too.

The Captain told us about the mushrooms as big as a dinner plate. I have a top of one mushroom set up beside a large dinner plate—the old style ones. I put on saddle pockets [and] rode the Devil up the hill to get these luscious mushrooms. I had just filled both sides [when I] looked toward the bay. There [was] a boat in the harbor. I loped home. Then my husband rode down to the landing for the Captain. Being large, he had to ride to the house. They would leave the stores, groceries etc. This time a larger boat came. Seven shearers and one cook. Pico and Captain to bring the crew and our own dear Captain Waters, a very lovable man when you became acquainted. All on the *Pride*, large enough to take back the wool. [End.]

Notes:

1. The Rawlins’ photograhs are the only ones known of the house built by Mr. Mills and used by Captain Waters. In 1908 Waters built a larger house which was later used by Robert Brooks and the Lester family.

2. It is interesting to note that Minnie Waters speaks of a mule named Devil on San Miguel Island in 1888. It is concievable this is the same animal 15 years later.



1902 wreck of the Kate and Anna at Cuyler Harbor, San Miguel Island as seen in 1903. Mr. Rawlins is the wagon driver.



Wool Storage shed at Cuyler Harbor.



Wagon road leading from Cuyler Harbor to the ranch on San Miguel Island, 1903.



Captain Waters' ranch above Cuyler Harbor on San Miguel Island in 1903.



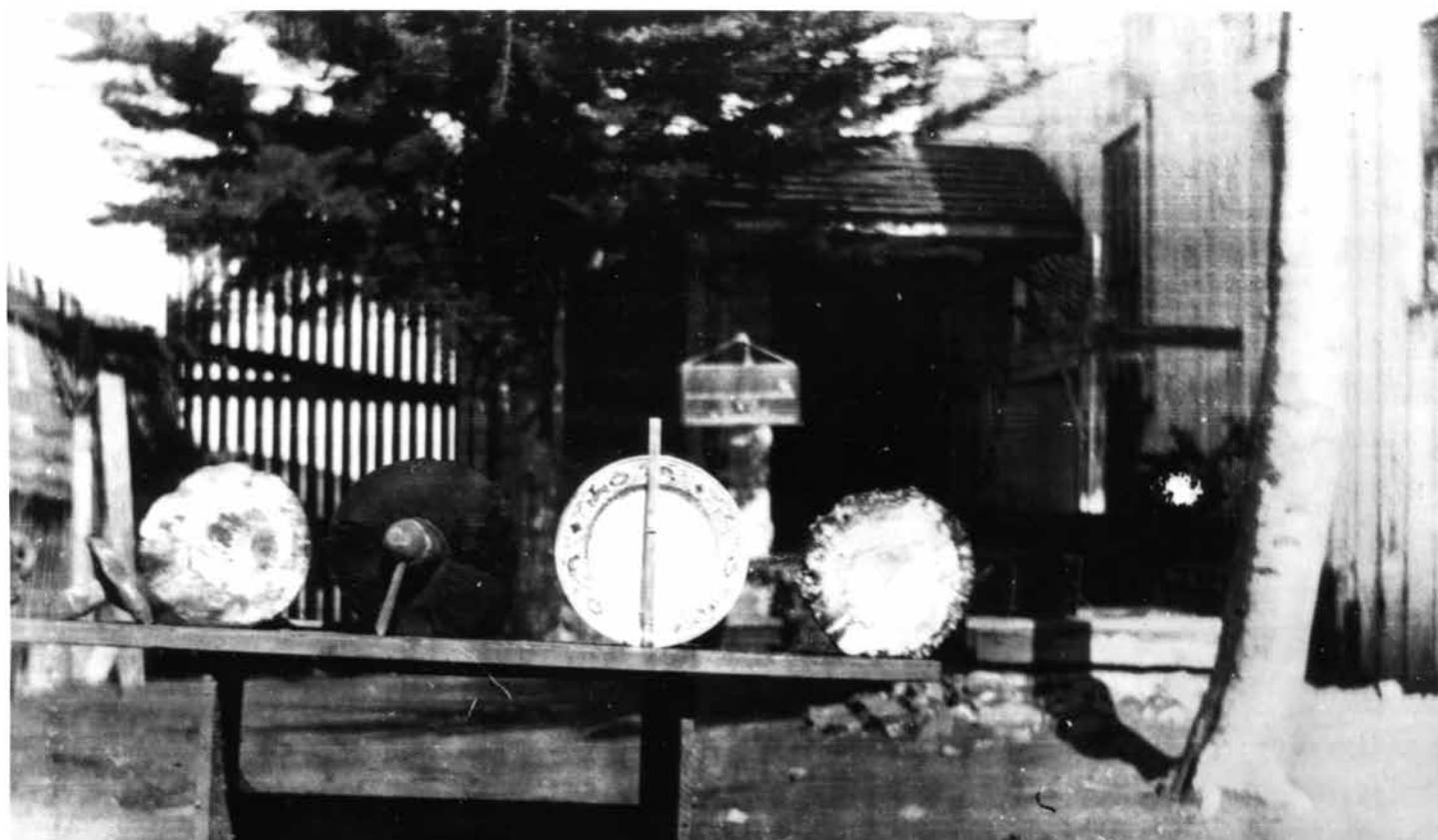
Arklee Rawlins with her children, Frannie and Richard, on San Miguel Island, 1903.



Captain Waters' San Miguel Island ranch where the Rawlins family lived in 1903. Note the barrels used to catch rain-water.



Sheep corral and shed on San Miguel Island, 1903.



Mushrooms collected on San Miguel Island in 1903. They are lined up beside a large dinner plate to illustrate their size